DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 217 441 CS 206 966

AUTHOR Levy, Mark R.; Rickard, Alan K.
TITLE "Learned Helplessness" and In-Depth Television News.
PUB DATE Jul 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism (65th, Athens, OH, July 25-28, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitudes; Content Analysis; *Helplessness; *News Reporting; Programing (Broadcast); Role Perception; *Television Research
IDENTIFIERS Reality; *Segment Three (NBC News); Television Documentaries

ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine whether "Segment Three" (a minidocumentary series aired weekdays from 1977 to 1979 on the "NBC Nightly News") consisted of highly dramatic, conflict-oriented messages that emphasized and exaggerated the inability of individuals to predict and control their own lives (learned helplessness). The "central" figures of 137 segments were identified, including well-known individuals or groups, as well as "unknowns" symbolizing more abstract concepts such as status, social class, or national peoples. Researchers then rated each figure on a five-point "helplessness" scale, based on the figure's comparative inability to affect the outcome of events or behaviors described. Results showed that more than 25% of the figures were rated as not helpless, while approximately 40% were rated as strongly or completely helpless. The remaining figures were rated mildly or moderately helpless. Five types of figures accounted for almost 62% of all central figures: American public, foreign nations, United States politicians and public officials, business persons or organizations, and persons with diseases or illnesses. In those segments where the central figure was the American public, the mean helplessness score was markedly higher than the average for the entire sample. It is clear that the in-depth reports of "Segment Three" mirror a reality of perceived helplessness. (HTH)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED217441

# "Learned Helplessness" and In-Depth Television News

Mark R. Levy and Alan K. Rickard
College of Journalism
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Mark R. Levy
Alan K. Rickard
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Presented to the Mass Communications and Society Division, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, Annual Meeting, Athens, Ohio, July, 1982.

Mark R. Levy is an associate professor and Director, Center for Research in Public Communication, College of Journalism, University of Maryland. Alan K. Rickard is a graduate student in the College. Video tapes analyzed in this study were provided by the Television News Archive, Vanderbilt University.

CS206966

Critics of television often decry its approach to news as superficial, overly dramatic, and uninformative (see, for example, 2). In partial response to such criticisms, broadcast journalists, particularly at the networks, have attempted -- so far unsuccessfully -- to expand the time allotted for their principal evening newscasts (6). However, while the newsman's dream of an hour-long network news program remains unfulfilled, one device for dealing with limitations of time and the unavoidable "headlines-only" content which results has been developed and routinely used for a number of years. That format element is the so-called "Special Report" or "Special Assignment," a three to five minute mini-documentary aired occasionally within the twenty-two minutes or so of the regular evening newscast.

One of the first and most highly praised of these mini-documentary series was NBC's "Segment Three." Unlike current programming practice in which such mini-documentaries appear only episodically, "Segment Three" was aired every weekday night from September, 1977 to June, 1979. As a regular part of the NBC Nightly News with John Chancellor, "Segment Three" stories were ballyhooed by NBC as news "done with insight, style and grace that captivate viewers" (3).

As part of a larger study of "Segment Three" and its significance for broadcast journalism, we examined the content of those reports from a theoretical perspective known as "learned helplessness" (4). Following Levine (5), we wanted to find out if "Segment Three" stories, like regular news items, also consisted of highly dramatic, conflict-oriented messages which emphasized and exaggerated the inability of the individual to predict and control his or her own life. Such messages, according to Levine, might

provide the stimulus for a kind of vicarious learning in which exposure leads to invalid and perhaps personally harmful notions of "reality." If the in-depth news stories of "Segment Three" shared this latent message with regular news items, then we believed an even stronger case could be made for the assertion that all television news models a "world" whose hallmark is individual helplessness.

## METHOD

A sample of 137 "Segment Threes" was drawn from the population of all "Segment Three" episodes. One-third of all segments aired were selected by simple random sampling within months. The authors viewed video tapes of each segment chosen and, as a starting point, identified as the "central figure" of the story that person or social actor who was the principal substantive focus of the report. The coding scheme allowed for the possibility that central figures might be not only well-known individuals or groups, but also "unknowns" who symbolized larger, more abstract entities such as status types, social classes, or even entire national societies (e.g. "the French"). Following Levine (5), portrayal of the central figure was rated on a five-point "helplessnes" scale: 5-completely helpless; 4-strongly helpless; 3-moderately helpless; 2-mildly helpless; 1-virtually not helpless, that is in relatively complete control. Helplessness was operationally defined as the comparative inability of the central figure to affect the outcome, good or bad, of events, processes, or behaviors described. (In five segments examined, the helplessness scale was found non-applicable to story content.)

In addition to the overall helplessness score, three orthogonal dimensions of helplessness were also coded: locus of helplessness, chronicity of helplessness, and specificity of helplessness (see 1 for a theoretical discussion of these dimensions).

Locus of helplessness was coded either "internal" or "external," with "internal" defined as outcomes contingent on the behavior of the central figure and "external" as outcomes contingent on factors and forces outside the behavioral response capability of the central figure. Chronicity of helplessness was coded either "stable," by which was meant relatively long-lived or recurrent helplessness; or "unstable," i.e. short-lived or intermittant helplessness. Specificity of helplessness was judged either to be "global," that is affecting a wide variety of situations for the central figure; or "specific," by which we meant a type of helplessness with comparatively limited situational impact for the central figure. Based on Scott's coefficient (8), intercoder reliability was 0.97 for identification of central figures, 0.92 for the overall helplessness score, and 0.96 for the three dimensions of helplessness.

## FINDINGS

Across the entire sample, the mean helplessness score was 2.79 (s=1.36). In one-quarter (25.8 percent) of all segments, the central figure was scored "1," that is not helpless. A somewhat smaller proportion (18.9 percent) of all central figures were portrayed as mildly helpless and 15.9 percent as moderately helpless. Almost two-fifths of all central figures examined were rated as either strongly helpless (30.3 percent) or completely helpless (9.1 percent). These findings are generally consistent with those reported (5) for a sample of network news stories from a two-week period prior to 1977, and similarly our results suggest a modeling of reality in which social actors are portrayed as mildly to moderately helpless.

Sixteen different catagories of central figures were identified. Five types accounted for almost sixty-two percent of all central figures: the

U.S. public (18.5 percent), foreign nations or societies (11.9 percent), U.S. politicians and public officials (12.6 percent), businessmen or business organizations (10.4 percent), and people with diseases or illnesses (8.1 percent). With one exception, there were no siginificant differences in helplessness scores between these five specific types of central figures and the overall sample mean. The exception occured in those segments where the central figure was the American "public," and there the mean helplessness score of 3.40 (s=1.35) was markedly higher than the sample average ($t=2.55$, d.f.=36, one-tailed $p < .05$).

This finding suggests that the aggregate of "average Americans" was depicted as being between moderately and strongly unable to control their own lives. Indeed, while in 12.0 percent of these segments, the U.S. public was pictured as being "in control," in 44.0 percent all Americans were rated strongly helpless and in 20.0 percent, completely helpless. The content of stories in which the American public was the central figure ranged across a wide variety of topics, but some sixty percent focused either on criminal activities; energy and the environment; or mass culture such as television programs, motion pictures, and the like.

Returning to the overall sample and the dimensions of helplessness, helplessness was generally modeled as resulting from factors and influences operating outside the behavioral control of the central figure, likely to be enduring, but with no clear pattern with regard to specificity.[2] We will examine each dimension in turn. First, locus of helplessness. In 72.0 percent of all cases, control was situated outside the central figure. Moreover, external loci of helplessness were significantly associated with higher helplessness scores. For example, while 84.6 percent of central figures whose fates were contingent on their own behaviors were portrayed

as only mildly or moderately helpless, only 33.3 percent of "externals" received similar scores on the helplessness scale and 66.7 percent of central figures who were subject to external forces were rated either strongly or completely helpless ($X^2$=27.99, d.f.=3, $p < .001$). Compared to the entire sample, no significant variations were observed in location of helplessness by type of central figure.

On chronicity of helplessness, 80.0 percent of all cases were coded "stable," with 20.0 percent "unstable." Increased chronicity of helplessness too was associated with higher scores on the helplessness scale. For example, 75.0 percent of all central figures with unstable helplessness scores were also rated as mildly or moderately helpless. By contrast, 60.2 percent of those central figures whose helplessness was "stable" were also portrayed as strongly or completely helpless ($X^2$=12.80, d.f.=3, $p < .01$).

(Table 1 About Here)

With the exception of U.S. politicians-officials, results on the chronicity dimension did not vary significantly from the general, sample-wide pattern taking type of central figure into account. However, contrary to the overall pattern, the duration of helplessness modeled for American politicians and officials was significantly less stable. In 63.6 percent of those segments in which politicians-officials were the central figure, helplessness was rated "unstable" (Corrected $X^2$=11.80, d.f.=1, $p < .001$). This result may indicate that political figures were pictured as living in a changeable environment whose outcomes vary with the next public opinion poll or election.

Results on the generality of helplessness measure were approximately evenly split, with 47.0 percent of cases coded "specific" and 53.0 percent coded "global." There was no significant association between the measure of generality and scores on the helplessness scale. However, there were two striking deviations from the overall pattern by type of central figure. The first centered on differences between the portrayal of the U.S. public compared to foreign societies. While in 86.4 percent of those segments featuring the American public as central figure helplessness was modeled as being "specific," in 100 percent of those segments involving entire foreign nations helplessness was presented as globablly extending across many aspects of social life (Corrected $X^2$=19.00, d.f.=1, $p < .001$). Thus "Segment Three" was saying in effect America is a nation with many problems, but few of these difficulties affect all Americans in all their social roles. On the other hand, foreign societies, both in the industrial and developing world, are shown to be far less socially segmented, far less pluralistic, and far more universally "troubled."

The second important deviation from the overall pattern centers on a comparison between the U.S. public at large and two other central figure types, American politicians-officials and persons with illnesses. Compared to the U.S. public, both of these types of central figures had significantly larger proportions of global helplessness scores. Among political types, helplessness inducing factors were portrayed as having far-reaching consequences in 63.6 percent of cases, compared to global scores for 13.6 percent of those segments involving the American public (Corrected $X^2$=6.47, d.f.=1, $p < .05$); while among sick persons helplessness was rated as global in an even larger 85.7 percent of cases (Corrected $X^2$=9.74, d.f.=1, $p < .01$). That the helplessness of politicians and sick persons was portrayed as

comparatively global may reflect a social definition of politician or sick person as a "master" status whose consequences both in terms of helplessness and other social behaviors is broadly encompassing.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, it is clear that "Segment Three's" in-depth reports "mirror" a reality of helplessness. Socially significant actors such as political leaders and businessmen as well as the largely invisible "public" or persons who unfortunately are ill were all modeled as helpless, sometimes severely and chronically so. That the American public was rated even more helpless than average raises the possibility that many viewers, particularly those of the middle class, may be especially susceptible to learning a world-view of helplessness. While political figures too were presented as generally helpless, our findings also suggest that politicians and officials are expected to act as "leaders;" that they are expected to "do something;" and that more than most others, their initiatives and behaviors may make a difference.

While there is little doubt that broadcast journalists, like all other newsworkers, seek to make their reports dramatic and conflict-filled in order to capture audience attention, there is no inherent reason why that drama or conflict need be presented so frequently in the helpless terms we found. Afterall, in the individual's life-struggle with him- or herself, with society, and with nature, there are those who triumph. It is also true that those "winners" don't often get on television news.

This study has not, of course, demonstrated that mass media messages high in helplessness necessarily teach audiences to feel helpless. But this study has found one type of message which meets at least

the necessary condition for such an effect. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence (see 7, for example) which links high levels of television news exposure to accute feelings of political inefficacy. Thus, as the television networks continue to present their in-depth reports and with the possibility remaining that more in-depth reports may be programmed, it becomes even more important for researchers to investigate whether and how television news teaches helplessness.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Since all "Segment Threes" were approximately the same length ($\bar{x}$= 292 seconds, s= 37 seconds), it was unnecessary to weight individual segments in order to determine the frequencies reported here and below. Indeed, when as a test of this assumption, scores were weighted by segment duration, the resulting frequency distribution for scores on the helplessness scale did not differ significantly from the unweighted results.

2. The modal combination of the three helplessness dimensions was external-stable-global (32.0 percent), followed by external-stable-specific (29.0 percent), and internal-stable-global (14.0 percent). No other combination of dimensions accounted for more than 9.0 percent. Patterns of combined dimensions for central figure types generally followed the findings presented here with helplessness dimensions taken one at a time.

Table 1: Dimensions of "Learned Helplessness" by Central Figure Types (In Percent)

| CENTRAL FIGURE | HELPLESSNESS DIMENSIONS | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | LOCATION | | CHRONICITY | | SPECIFICITY | |
| | INTERNAL | EXTERNAL | STABLE | UNSTABLE | GLOBAL | SPECIFIC |
| U.S. Public (N=22) | 13.6 | 86.4 | 95.5 | 4.5 | 13.6 | 86.4[b] |
| Politicians-Officials (N=11) | 45.5 | 54.5 | 36.4 | 63.6[a] | 63.6[c] | 36.4 |
| Foreign Public (N=11) | 18.2 | 81.8 | 100.0 | 0.0 | 100.0 | 0.0 |
| Businessmen-Businesses (N=12) | 33.3 | 66.7 | 75.0 | 25.0 | 33.3 | 66.7 |
| Sick Persons (N=7) | 14.3 | 85.7 | 100.0 | 0.0 | 85.7 | 14.3[d] |
| Total Sample (N=98) | 28.0 | 72.0 | 80.0 | 20.0 | 53.0 | 47.0 |

[a]Politician-Rest of Sample Comparison: Corrected $X^2=11.80$, d.f.=1, $p<.001$

[b]U.S. Public-Foreign Public Comparison: Corrected $X^2=19.00$, d.f.=1, $p<.00$;

[c]Politicians-U.S. Public Comparison: Corrected $X^2=6.47$, d.f.=1, $p<.05$

[d]Sick Persons-U.S. Public Comparison: Corrected $X^2=9.74$, d.f.=1, $p<.01$

## REFERENCES


1. Abramson, Lyn Y., Judy Garber, and Martin E.P. Seligman. "Learned Helplessness in Humans: An Attributional Analysis." In J. Garber and M. Seligman (Eds.), Human Helplessness. New York: Academic Press, 1980, pp. 3-34.

2. Barrett, Marvin and Zachary Sklar. The Eye of the Storm. New York: Lippincott & Crowell, 1980.

3. Broadcasting. "NBC-TV conconcts new ingredients to spice up news." Washington, D.C., May 23, 1977, p. 54.

4. Judy Garber and Martin E.P. Seligman (Eds.). Human Helplessness. New York: Academic Press, 1980.

5. Levine, Grace F. "'Learned Helplessness' and the Evening News." Journal of Communication 27(4), Autumn 1977, pp.100-105.

6. RTNDA Communicator. "News Scan." Washington, D.C.: Radio-Television News Directors Association, November 1981, p. 4.

7. Robinson, Michael J. "Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise: the case of the Selling of the Pentagon." American Political Science Review 70(2), 1976, pp. 409-432.

8. Scott, William A. "Reliability of Content Analysis: the case of nominal scale coding." Public Opinion Quarterly 19(3), Fall, 1955, pp. 321-325.